



Full Length Article

The road (not) taken: The contingencies of infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

State-building
Infrastructure
Railways
Ports
Political geography
Africa
Oil politics
Historical sociology
Regional integration

ABSTRACT

This article offers a longitudinal study of the complex entanglements between infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn of Africa. By analysing Ethiopia's imperial transport corridors, the political economy of Djibouti's Red Sea ports, and the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline between South Sudan, Khartoum, and global markets, we underline the co-production of infrastructure and sovereignty as a defining feature of regional politics in the last 150 years. In a region notorious for the redrawing of borders, continuous violent conflict, and contested sovereignties, we emphasize the contingency of this relationship by making two central arguments. First, infrastructures have been central to the exercise of sovereignty and the consolidation of political orders in the region; dams, pipelines and ports have spearheaded efforts to hardwire centralizing political institutions, extractive commercial relations, and centripetal sentiments of belonging. Second, in doing so these infrastructures have sought to disable infrastructural alternatives because rival infrastructural visions embody competing claims of sovereignty. However, as state-building projects and the infrastructures they prioritize have often failed to successfully neutralise opposing articulations of political authority and belonging, we argue that the vulnerability of existing infrastructures contributes to the vulnerability of political order in the Horn. This article draws attention to the roads not taken and how those could have changed -and might still reconfigure-the politics of the region.

In the last two decades, infrastructure building has staged a comeback in Africa as both a physical reality in reshaping regional political economies and as an imaginary of development. The fiscal crisis of the late 20th century African state was also a crisis of infrastructure: as commodity prices declined, debt-to-GDP ratios increased and Structural Adjustment curtailed government expenditure, spending on energy, irrigation canals, and transportation corridors plummeted. Yet the start of the 21st century has seen a surge in investment, from railways connecting Katanga's mines to the Atlantic to port facilities in Cotonou to Egypt's New Suez Canal. Even if declining economic growth after 2014 tempered the bonanza, the centrality of infrastructure in contemporary Africa is not fading.

As Hönke (2018) highlights, this revival invites us to revisit the theory and practice of sovereignty in Africa. Scholarship on the latter has been considerably influenced by Bayart's (1993) image of the rhizomatic state forfeiting Weberian power projection by formal institutions over a well-demarcated territory. But as Herbst (2000) underlined, infrastructure has played a key role in what are conventionally understood to be weak states with colonially drawn, artificial

borders: roads, railways and airports have been essential 'to broadcast power' (p.3) and maintain a modicum of control. The infrastructural resurgence of the last 20 years thus raises new questions about the historical determinants of the relationship between political authority and infrastructure. Can new infrastructure projects remake African states by reconfiguring the circulation of flows (Stepputat & Hagmann, 2019)? Are struggles over capital accumulation and distribution turning parts of the continent into a global urban frontier (Goodfellow, 2022)? Or does today's boom reproduce older patterns of Africa's marginalization in the world (Zajontz & Taylor, 2021)?

This article concentrates on the Horn of Africa where the construction of large-scale infrastructure has in the last two centuries been central to state- and nation-building ambitions. Drawing on an understanding of the state rooted in Historical Sociology, we treat the relationship between infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn as mutually constitutive yet highly vulnerable. For decades, this has been a region of tremendous political volatility, including frequent regime change, ideological revolutions, catastrophic violence, and the redrawing of borders. Ongoing processes of 'state formation and decay' (Clapham,

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2017) are crucial to this high-permanent instability as is the unique character of the region's international relations. In the Horn, the post-1963 continental consensus around the acceptance of colonial state borders and non-interference in internal affairs was not accepted, neither in theory nor in practice. This has underpinned myriad civil and inter-state conflicts and the frequent redrawing of the map, including state collapse in Somalia and state creation in Eritrea, South Sudan, and (*de facto*) Somaliland just in the last 35 years.

Despite this upheaval, infrastructure development has remained central to the ambitions of ruling elites. Notwithstanding the widely differing ideological proclivities of various regimes, there has been a shared belief in the transformational character of railways, dams, and other *grands projets*. They have marshalled formidable resources, often through partnerships with external actors, to remake their own polity and reset relations with their populations and global markets. Gambits such as the construction of deep-water ports in Mogadishu and Berbera in the 1970s and 1980s, Ethiopia's resettlement and villagization schemes in the 1980s and 2010s, and Sudan's Merowe Dam in the 2000s, have been fraught with financial and technical risks and faced significant opposition but have retained enduring allure for incumbents.

Borrowing from the growing scholarship in anthropology and critical geography (Aalders, 2021; Appel et al., 2018; Larkin, 2013; Lesutis, 2021), we go beyond re-emphasizing how politics drives infrastructure and instead see infrastructure and sovereignty as coproduced (Schubert, 2018). By co-production we understand not a deterministic relationship between infrastructure and political sovereignty, but a relational dynamic that is 'symmetrical' (Jasanoff, 2004, p. 3) in how infrastructural dimensions of sovereignty and the political dimensions of infrastructure co-exist dialectically. But unlike the literature in anthropology and geography, our emphasis on sovereignty contributes most directly to the extensive body of knowledge preoccupied with the international state system in African politics. It is here that we are re-inserting infrastructure as a central mediator of sovereignty, not only in terms of domestic authority but particularly in rethinking the wider regional implications of infrastructures, such as Ethiopia's controversial 2024 port deal with Somaliland.

As such, we explore two research questions: why have infrastructures been critical in shaping political sovereignties in the Horn of Africa? And how do the contingencies associated with infrastructure contribute to the vulnerability of political orders in the region? We make two overarching and, crucially, inter-related arguments.

First, infrastructures are particularly central to the articulation and exercise of sovereignty in the Horn because of the unique post-colonial and -imperial trajectory of the region's borders and actively contested sovereignties. Infrastructures engender economic dependencies and political relationships-dynamics also evident in other parts of Africa and indeed the wider world. The recent infrastructure boom is the latest iteration of long-standing efforts to bolster the capacities of states in the Horn to control recalcitrant territories, restructure internal economic and social relations, and reposition their polities within regional orders. Infrastructures have historically been instruments for sovereigns with weak legitimacy and tenuous authority to strengthen their central bureaucracies, expand resource extraction, and territorialize distant peripheries where states have historically been intermittently present or altogether absent. This has generated lucrative rents for ruling elites, as well as administrative and business establishments involved in the planning, construction, and operation of infrastructures. Such attempts at changing political geographies to shore up national security and cohesion also affect the external dimensions of sovereignty. Infrastructures establish a physical presence that signifies territorial ownership. Their embedding in commercial treaties, memoranda of understandings, and technical agreements with external actors serves as recognition of the host's sovereignty.

Second, we contend that in the Horn of Africa the choice for one infrastructural vision often means the deliberate abandonment of one or more possible alternatives. This is not only a result of resource

constraints that limit what can be built but also because state-building through infrastructures has in the Horn mostly failed to successfully neutralise rivaling articulations of political order. Understood through this inter-relational prism, infrastructures tend to be choices for one articulation of sovereignty *contra* rival formulations. These choices, however, are vulnerable. Infrastructures rarely do exactly what they are claimed to be achieving. Infrastructures suffer from lack of maintenance, failed construction, attacks, and their economic or environmental rationale is usually weaker than their utility in affirming sovereignty internally and externally. Their political currency can fade over time and the symbolic value may shift as subsequent regimes have different needs. This historical contingency of infrastructures highlights the simultaneous contingency of political orders. This article therefore draws attention to the *roads not taken*, the futures not pursued and what they may have meant and might still mean for alternative configurations of sovereignty in the Horn.

To explore these interstices across time and space, our paper develops a longitudinal and relational mode of analysis to engage the political lives of infrastructures (and those forgone). The first section traces the historically determined and spatially variegated relationship between infrastructure and sovereignty across Africa. Subsequently, we foreground state-building in the Horn and highlight five functions played by infrastructure in processes of strengthening the articulation of vulnerable sovereignties. In the paper's latter sections, we draw on three distinct but inter-related case studies to flesh out our conceptual arguments: Ethiopia's imperial transport corridors, Djibouti and the political economy of Red Sea ports, and the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline between South Sudan, Khartoum, and global markets.

1. Infrastructure & the African State System

Africa's infrastructural resurgence since the 2000s has spawned an interdisciplinary literature examining the historical antecedents, social meanings, and shifting interests buttressing these material systems. This scholarship has moved beyond early preoccupations in development economics with how more tarmac might translate into more output (Ayogu, 2007).

As the continent has been rapidly urbanizing, infrastructure as a window into urban statecraft has proven a flourishing field of inquiry, including as a means of uncovering logics of co-option in evolving political settlements (Goodfellow, 2018). African cities are sites of violent contestations as the limited resources available to absorb rural migrants moving into cities stand in stark contrast to megaprojects that offer new models of raising revenue for government elites (Terrefe, 2020). Seeking to reinterpret everyday state-society interactions, urban studies scholars concentrate on how processes of urbanization are negotiated through electricity connections, sewers, and pipes (Neves Alves, 2021). Anthropology and critical geography have been similarly attuned to the idea that infrastructures mediate state-society relations (Anand, 2015; Lemanski, 2019; Von Schnitzler, 2013). Lesutis (2021) illustrates how the construction of a railway territorialises the state as a form of 'order-making that is imbued social tensions' (p.9), while others have highlighted the reproduction of colonial-era plans in contemporary infrastructural visions (Aalders, 2021; Enns & Bersaglio, 2019). Infrastructures are not just material objects, but 'enchant' their subjects in Peru (Harvey & Knox, 2015), and unsettle social relations across the Albanian-Greek border (Dalakoglou, 2017). Such 'poetics' (Larkin, 2013) arbitrate the relationship between citizens and political authority, from sentiments of anticipation and belonging to disillusionment and marginalization in Dakar (Melly, 2013). How infrastructures can spur local resistance against central governments has been a salient theme (Kochore, 2016).

Another burgeoning research programme pertains to infrastructure's global vectors. Many analysts concentrate on geopolitical competition as a driver (Gil & Stafford, 2019; Schindler & DiCarlo, 2022), fixating especially on the catalytic role of capital and technical expertise from

China (Foster et al., 2009). This has spurred investigations into the bargaining power of African negotiators (Soulé-Kohndou, 2019, pp. 189–204) and processes of mutual learning and intersecting modernities in collaborations between African planners and their Asian peers-cum-comrades (Verhoeven, 2020). Yet whereas much attention has been devoted to Africa's integration into global value chains, considerably less has gone towards how bridges, airports, and cables impact relations between African states. While urban studies, political economy, anthropology, and critical geography have contributed to studying how infrastructures reproduce, or become sites of contesting state power, our aim in this paper is to reinsert infrastructure within the African Studies literature that recognizes the centrality of the inter-state system, both in how it reflects particular ideas and practices of sovereignty and in how it shapes the preferences of political elites.

If geopolitical rivalries in Europe and the evolving logics of European capitalism in the late 1800s drove the colonization of Africa, infrastructure was critical to the colonial state's 'broadcasting' of power and its ability to extract resources (Herbst, 2000). Most canals and railways constructed in the late 19th and early 20th century served to ferry commodities to European markets rather than further the integration of African territories (Freud, 2010). This imperialist bequest explains why post-independence African governments sought to compensate for the historical weakness of, and deep contradictions within, national identity. Constructing dams (Ghana, Tanzania), irrigation canals (Libya), entire new capitals (Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire) and above all roads appeared powerful tools to correct the whims of colonial divide-and-rule and to redraw the political geographies of fragmented peoples (Jedwab & Storeygard, 2019). Early post-colonial infrastructures aimed to complement *de jure* sovereignty with a tangible sense of statehood, by which we understand the practical extension of state authority and the ability to take consequential policy decisions within a given territory.

However, enthusiasm for railways, communication facilities, and grids as a means of asserting sovereignty subsided quickly. Commodity prices plunged in the 1970s and cycles of austerity and debt rescheduling dominated the 1980s and 1990s. African governments lacked the money to maintain infrastructure, let alone initiate new construction. But such disinvestment was also facilitated by the normative context in which most African states operated. The international system recognized former imperial possessions as sovereign states on account of having been colonized and recognized by their peers (Englebert, 2009), as opposed to empirical statehood - the ability to project authority within a defined territory and guard against external intervention (Mayall, 2011). African sovereigns resolved that regional politics should be governed by principles of absolute territorial integrity and non-interference in internal affairs. This was codified by the Organisation for African Unity which recognized borders as drawn by imperialist rulers and posited a strenuous anti-interventionist norm to govern inter-state relations (Adebajo, 2017, pp. 41–56). Because African states lacked a 'security imperative to control the hinterlands' (Herbst, 2000, p. 21), this framework elevated *de jure* over *de facto* sovereignty. Governments therefore had less reason to invest in a meaningful presence across their territories because the continental consensus against secessions made them implausible outcomes of societal grievances (Kamanu, 1974). These norms coupled with declining revenues and Structural Adjustment halted the post-independence surge of dams, roads, and ports as markers of legitimate and effective government.

Historically, most literature on Africa in the world has analysed the relations of African polities with the superpowers and former colonial rulers by emphasizing the brittleness of African sovereignty (Clapham, 1996; Jackson & Rosberg, 1986), rather than unpacking how African states relate to each other and what kind of foreign and domestic policies this generates. Studies of infrastructure largely reproduce this framing by often emphasizing global connections. A notable exception is the policy-oriented regional integration literature, which prescribes infrastructure as necessary to overcome 'the disadvantages of geography and sovereign fragmentation' (Ndulu, 2006). How infrastructures have

moulded specific articulations of African sovereignty vis-a-vis each other has been considerably less studied. We understand sovereignty as quintessentially relational, not only in the way the critical tradition sees infrastructures as mediating relations between the state and its subjects, but in how polities relate to each other. Infrastructures create (inter) dependencies, from integrating isolated communities into larger circuits of accumulation to connecting centres of authority with new sources of rents to offering platforms for exchanging commodities or launchpads for invasion. These processes significantly reshape how legitimate political authority is perceived and exercised across borders because they impact interpretations of autonomy, proximity, and threat. This allows us to rethink 'the modalities through which a territory becomes the object of an appropriation or of the exercise of a power or a jurisdiction' (Mbembe, 2000, p. 262). Infrastructures can enable certain forms of sovereignty, while disabling others internally and externally, as illustrated by Africa's colonial and post-colonial history. While acknowledging the local, national and global scale in the study of infrastructure on the continent, we re-centre regional relationships to study the entanglements of infrastructure and sovereignty.

The Horn of Africa offers an intriguing canvas because the normative context of its international relations is resoundingly different (Kornprobst, 2002). The OAU's founding principles of *de jure* sovereignty, territorial integrity of post-colonial borders, and non-interference in internal affairs deflated inter-state conflicts in most of Africa, but not in the Horn. Whereas Ethiopia was a driving force behind the OAU's formation, for neighbours like Somalia and some of the peoples inside Ethiopia's frontiers, the OAU consensus was an unacceptable legitimization of the consequences of competing European, Egyptian-Turkish and Abyssinian imperialisms during the 19th and 20th century (Khadigala, 2010). Demands that boundaries be changed, and sovereignties redefined, led to confrontations between the Horn's states. Border and proxy conflicts, secessions (successful and not), and inter-state wars have been constant features of the Horn's international relations. These dynamics have shaped the functions of infrastructure in the region, enabling some sovereignties and disabling others.

2. State-building & its infrastructures in the Horn of Africa

As outlined in the introduction, this paper advances two key lines of argument that are mutually dependent and should not be understood in isolation. First, infrastructures in the Horn of Africa have been central to the articulation and exercise of sovereignty, aiming to address historical vulnerabilities in the consolidation of political orders. Second, infrastructures, like sovereignty, are inherently relational and vulnerable, especially in the Horn where state-building projects, including through infrastructure, have often failed to decisively eliminate alternative imaginings of legitimate and effective authority. Planned, partially built, or forsaken corridors, airports and terminals often embody opposing imaginaries of how territories, economic flows and governance structures could be organized, spatially and ideationally. This duality highlights the importance of understanding rival infrastructural visions as competing 'claims' of sovereignty (Hansen & Stepputat, 2005). Importantly, forgone infrastructures remain centrally anchored in the historiographies and imaginations of those who desire alternative futures in the Horn.

To substantiate these claims, we draw on the analytical arsenal supplied by Historical Sociology and its central proposition that neither the state nor sovereignty are a given, but must be built and articulated: the task is to historicize their origins and evolution, not as a one-way path of which the *telos* is preordained or inherently preferable to other forms of political authority, but as a contingent process in which setbacks, reconfigurations and resistance deserve as much attention as consolidation (Kaspersen & Strandsbjerg, 2017). This entails recognizing the critical role of violence in how states come to represent certain social forces while quashing their competitors and how the ever-present possibility of coercion regulates relations between social

classes. Yet while states reflect societal hierarchies, they cannot be reduced to them, developing relative autonomy (Mann, 1988). Ideology and norms are paramount to that autonomy and associated processes of coercion and administration, not least in legitimating how power is exercised and in denying legitimacy to alternatives (Skocpol, 1979). Crucially, 'state autonomy is two sided, directed at society within and other states without' (Halliday, 2005, p. 70). The (un)building of states needs to be situated in an international context of capitalist modernity and the competition with other claimants of effective and legitimate political authority (Hobson, 2000). Because processes of state (re)construction and consolidation are shaped by external rivalries and regional conflicts, contestations over authority and autonomy in one polity often unsettle political bargains and social hierarchies in neighbouring states.

The nature of sovereignty in the Horn is predicated on extraordinary levels of violence over long time-periods, especially at the physical or imagined frontiers of polities where sovereignties have historically overlapped (Reid, 2011). Characterised by frequently changing political identities and economic geographies, the region has experienced extensive conflict which has continuously reproduced the unsettled nature of political order. To this day, internal and external frontiers remain in flux and intensely contested (Lyons, 2009; Markakis, 2011). Since most contemporary rulers came to power through civil conflict, wars of liberation, or coup d'états, political violence and its historical 'myths' (Emmenegger, 2021) remain principal determinants of the formation and decay of state institutions and how incumbents and their challengers perceive them.

Neither infrastructures nor the evolution of political authority in the Horn of Africa have been understudied; rich literatures speak to the complex histories of both, including recent emphasis on the co-production of the logistics of circulation and political orders (Schouten et al., 2019). However, they have seldom been in sustained dialogue with each other. This becomes especially important in view of the region's exceptionally diverse physical geography, which puts trenchant questions before aspiring state-builders. The Horn is a composite of Sahelian drylands, immense wetlands, rugged escarpments, tropical forests, and scorching saline lakes, sometimes transitioning into each other within a dozen miles. These topographies have long posed logistical dilemmas for administrators seeking to extract resources, centralize surplus and project authority over diverse peoples, contested territories and vast distances (Korf et al., 2013). Remoteness and poor connectivity have undermined the ability to 'see' subjects and often allowed recalcitrant populations and local satraps to elude meaningful oversight (Donham & James, 1986).

In this context of geographic and security constraints, infrastructures sit at the centre of rival articulations of sovereignty. While González-Ruibal (2022) sees state infrastructures 'as traps that serve to fix and control populations' (p.9), we treat them as analytical entry points to capture the vulnerability of the Horn's un-fixed political orders and the strategies of state-builders in pursuit of their goals. Doing so allows us to discern five key functions that big infrastructures have historically played in processes of state-building across the Horn: through them ruling elites have attempted to strengthen what remain vulnerable sovereignties while often violently displacing those offering resistance or embracing alternative forms of political order.

First, erecting railways, bridges and canals has reinforced the budgets, confidence, and mandates of national bureaucracies which, as chief implementers of state-building designs, have frequently instrumentalised infrastructure to exert exceptional authority- and to deny it to those resisting them. By framing construction as an indispensable part of the state-building endeavour, civil servants augment their standing in society and simultaneously emphasize how they stand above it: 'having a historic mission of such breadth may provide a ruling intelligentsia with high morale, solidarity, and the willingness to make and impose sacrifices. The vision of a grand future is often in sharp contrast to the disorder, misery, and unseemly scramble for petty advantages that the elites very likely see in their daily foreground' (Scott, 1998, p.170).

Examples abound, including Sudan's Dam Implementation Unit (DIU) which was allowed to operate outside normal budgetary, administrative, and legislative procedures while constructing hydro-infrastructure between 2003 and 2015 on the Nile and its tributaries (Verhoeven, 2015). This was facilitated by recruiting DIU staff predominantly from the economic and ethnic elite that in the last two centuries has dominated Sudanese politics from the Nile Valley, frequently through the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Khartoum, Sudan's premier academic institution. Controlling a budgetary war chest that likely exceeded US \$14billion, the DIU not only erected dams but focused on airports, archaeological excavations, agricultural schemes, hospitals, and resettlement. Such bureaucratic empire-building is often underpinned by the threat of violence. In the DIU's case, President Omar Al-Bashir allowed it to recruit its own security service and to expropriate and detain citizens (Hashim, 2010).

Second, the goal of reinforcing the grip of sovereigns on their territory and populations is often accomplished by the rerouting of circuits of accumulation via key infrastructures (Hagmann & Stepputat, 2023). This may well generate aggregate increases in prosperity but in the Horn, a central objective is often the reworking of the extant political geography. For example, Kenya's Standard Gauge Railway, constructed between 2014 and 2017, has sought to rebalance coastal versus inland power. It has (further) marginalized the country's long-standing customs hub on the Indian Ocean, Mombasa, and fortified the hold on revenue flows of the state's political-economic core around Nairobi and the heartland of the Kikuyu administrative and business establishment (Lesutis, 2021).

Third, infrastructures enhance the state's presence in the peripheries and borderlands where it has historically been most contested or altogether absent, thereby effectively territorializing the state's boundaries and opening new spaces for capital accumulation (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018). Construction, operation, and maintenance of infrastructures necessitate the movement and settlement of state officials who are accompanied by agents of coercion. This facilitates the close surveillance and assimilation of previously elusive citizens-subjects, reconfiguring understandings of -and control over-space and population. Though security concerns about domestic insurgencies or external infiltration remain paramount, infrastructure projects also 'articulate a desire no longer just to control and contain these regions but also to transform them' (Mosley & Watson, 2016, p. 453). This is evident in post-2008 designs for 'civilizing the pastoral frontier' constituted by the South Omo Valley, historically peripheral to Ethiopia's national economy and regarded as a wasteland, where cattle-raiding and inter-communal violence is rife (Regassa et al., 2019). The party-state decreed the construction of hydro-electric dams, cotton plantations, and a sugar industry. Such territorialization-through-infrastructure offered the prospect of simultaneously reducing Ethiopia's import bill, forging alliances between the centre and local Omo Valley elites, and finally anchoring the area in Ethiopia and tying its inhabitants closer to the Ethiopian state.

Fourth, nation-building: infrastructure projects are narrated as part of nationalist histories and futures from their respective centres of power (Mohamud & Verhoeven, 2016). Aspiring state-builders have portrayed the gargantuan costs of mega-infrastructures as collective sacrifices through which the historical contradictions holding the nation back will be resolved, birthing a new identity. For instance, launching the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) reflected in part the felt need by the dominant Tigrayan faction of the party-state to counter critiques that its rule only benefited a narrow ethno-linguistic minority. The dam, christened *Hidassie* (Amharic for Renaissance), concretized the dream of regional hegemony through a hydro-electric grid with Ethiopia at the centre. Through a decade-long mobilization campaign consisting of lotteries, school visits, beauty pageants, sporting events and diaspora bond issuances, all of Ethiopia's nations and nationalities were tied not only financially but also viscerally to the project and to each other (Menga, 2017). The GERD became 'a new nation-building anchor'

(Demerew, 2021, p. 2892), reconfiguring not only the ecology of the Nile, but also Ethiopia itself.

Fifth, big infrastructures allow states to shore up external dimensions of their sovereignty. They can help physically establish a military presence in a remote periphery and mark control over a contested border area or resource (like Egypt's High Aswan Dam), but also mould treaties, political agreements or trade-oriented memorandums of understanding that recognize the sovereignty of the host. Infrastructure can grease extra-regional alliances as foreign partners acquire financial stakes in projects and enable an embedding of the host's resources in regional or global capitalist circuits. Sudan, for instance, attempted to construct the Jonglei Canal, tying a possibly secessionist South more firmly into its political economy and enmeshing Sudan's vaunted agricultural and water potential in the markets of the Middle East (Suliman, 1992). Similarly, Somaliland has built relations with the UAE and attempted to rope Ethiopia into owning stakes in the Berbera port corridor to maximize its ability to chart its own future independent of Mogadishu (Stepputat & Hagmann, 2019).

Indeed, as the Jonglei and Berbera examples suggest, infrastructure has been instrumental in trying to ensure the hegemony of one configuration of legitimate authority over possible others through the creation of material facts – trade hubs, migration routes, bureaucratic reorganizations, investment partnerships – on the ground. As canals or turbines become material expressions of the status-quo, they can block viable alternative infrastructures, and therefore also political orders, especially in resource constrained regions like the Horn. Such forgone infrastructures educe how territory, political community and economic dependencies could have been, and might someday still be, organized. Our analysis in the next sections meanders between the Horn's existing infrastructural map and the roads not taken to alternative political sovereignties. This rarely discussed dimension of the entwining of infrastructure and sovereignty is illustrated by three of the region's most iconic and consequential infrastructures: the Addis-Djibouti Railway; the ports of Djibouti; and the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline.

3. The Abyssinian railway: Consolidating imperial authority

The construction of the Horn as a regional order in the 19th and 20th century was the result of the imperial thrust by both European colonizers and African powers— especially the invasions of Sudan and the Red Sea littoral by Muhammad Ali Pasha's dynasty in Cairo and the conquest by highland Abyssinians of dozens of kingdoms, chiefdoms and sultanates, from Nuer and Anuak communities in the west to Somali territories in the east and the multitude of Omotic and Surmic speakers in the south. These annexations gave contemporary Ethiopia its territorial boundaries but also amplified the difficulty of managing extraordinary diversity. To facilitate control and weather external challenges, its rulers prioritized assimilation policies and infrastructural construction, which included a telephone network, palaces, ministries, and airports (Levin, 2016), thereby consolidating territorial boundaries and reconfiguring spatial patterns of political rule and economic dependency. Despite Imperial Ethiopia's context of extreme fiscal scarcity and the pursuit by foes of very different territorial arrangements, alternative infrastructural configurations and therefore sovereignties became roads not taken.

A pivotal moment for the domestic consolidation of power by Menelik II (1844–1913) and his empire's external sovereignty was the construction of the *Chemin de Fer Franco-Ethiopien*. Given Italy's occupation of Eritrea, French and Swiss engineers had proposed a railway that would connect the ancient city of Harar, the eastern gateway to the Abyssinian highlands and nodal point for salt traders and camel herders, to the Red Sea (Pankhurst, 1985). Harar had been a place of prestige for Muslim communities as a cosmopolitan centre of learning and commerce hosting *ulema* from across the Horn and the Arabian Peninsula. Ranging from the 6th century Harla Kingdom to the Sultanates of Adal and Ifat, it had been central to different political configurations of the Horn (Abir, 1980). Menelik's subjugation of the most important

potential rival to the Abyssinian Empire spelled yet another iteration of Harar's shifting sovereignties (Caulk, 1977).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the city was still being incorporated into what many of its residents saw as a highlander imperialist project. As Ethiopia's largest urban centre, constructing the railroad through Harar risked undermining the aspirational primacy of the emperor's new capital, Addis Ababa, and the socio-cultural identity of an Orthodox-Christian and strongly Shewan empire. Additionally, the economic and logistical feasibility of building a railway through the Harari plateau was questionable. Therefore, Menelik and his European advisors moved the terminus to the foothills of the escarpment. As an outgrowth of the railway station emerged Addis Harar ('New Harar'), later renamed Dire Dawa. Construction was marred by disputes related to the Ethiopian Empire's external and internal sovereignty. On the one hand, Menelik sought to partner with Paris to balance local potentates, as well as Italy and Britain, who he feared were hatching alternative plans for much of his northern, western, and eastern territories. Exploiting European rivalries safeguarded his state-building project and provided him with weapons and custom duties that domestic enemies did not have. But Menelik insisted that the railway should not lead to vassalage. The Abyssinian sovereign perceived Franco-British negotiations over debt repayments and control of the line as a violation of the integrity of his empire (Bekele, 1991). Gilmour, writing in 1906, noted:

'The emperor declared that he regarded those clauses of the Convention which contemplated the ultimate acquisition of the railway up to the Hawash Valley by the French Government as a direct infringement of his rights as an independent sovereign' (p.31).

The first phase was completed in 1902 to the terminus in Dire Dawa. Holding out for concessions, Menelik refused to approve the construction towards Addis Ababa, as he would 'never consent' to a project 'built by a foreign government' (Gilmour, 1906, p. 48):

'I shall never allow the construction of a railroad that would be buttressed against my Ethiopian mountain, like a ladder to a fort that one wishes to storm' (as cited in Pierre-Alype, 1925, p. 169).

He ordered that all imported goods be 'shipped by camel caravan from Djibouti,' thereby further inducing financial losses to the French railway company until these disputes were resolved (Marcus, 2002, p. 107). In 1906, Britain, France and Italy signed the Tripartite Agreement affirming that they would 'not in any way infringe the sovereign rights of the Emperor of Abyssinia' (Agreement, 1907, Art 1.h). Subsequently, construction resumed, reaching Addis in 1917. For Menelik, the transport corridor thus became the infrastructural expression of his sovereignty.

The railway's completion 'put the final seal on the centrality of Addis Ababa' as the political and economic nucleus of the Abyssinian Empire (Zewde, 2001, p. 101). It catapulted Ethiopia into the global economy. The emergence of towns like Adama and Modjo and the expansion of trade reconfigured geographies of accumulation and spatial patterns of political power. The choice to construct a railway that connected the central highlands through Dire Dawa to the ports of Djibouti nourished patron-client relations and new cosmopolitan identities along this corridor, shifting imperial dominion towards central Shewa and away from northern Gondar, Wello and Tigray—historical centres of power and rivals of both Shewa and the various sultanates centred on Harar and its hinterland.

The railway became the vessel through which rulers in Addis consolidated authority vis-à-vis their internal rivals. Menelik's death in 1913 resulted in a power struggle between Lij Iyasu from Wello and Ras Taferi Mekonnen whose resource base lay in the Harar region. While several factors explain how the latter would become the powerful Emperor Haile Selassie, the railway 'contributed to the rise of Ras Tafari' because it not only facilitated 'the speedy despatch of loyal troops from his base in Harar to the capital' (Zewde, 2001, p. 101), but it also rerouted Ethiopia's Red Sea trade through Dire Dawa, diminishing the

position of elites in Wello. Although the old trade triangle between Harar, Zeila and Berbera persisted through camel caravans, the railway was an 'unprecedented opportunity for central power to exercise control over trade and benefit financially from indirect taxation through excise duty' (Barnes, 2001, p. 104).

Moreover, the new city of Dire Dawa enabled imperial officials to strengthen their position in Eastern Ethiopia. The railway's trajectory undermined Harar's historical dominance, a consequence still bemoaned by Harari intellectuals and officials today (Wehib, 2015). In subsequent decades, Abyssinian decision-makers were able to sideline the influential Harari/Adare merchant class (Waldron, 1975) and rebuff Somali elites for whom Harar was an educational, scholarly, and commercial beacon. Greek, Yemeni, Armenian and Indian merchants moved to Dire Dawa, and the city grew from about 9000 residents in 1903 to 40,000 two years later (Pankhurst, 1985). Dire Dawa and Harar are thus both rival and sister cities: Dire Dawa would have never existed without Harar's prominence, but nonetheless replaced Harar as the main trade corridor to the Red Sea and weakened the city's enduring political ambitions in subsequent decades.

The infrastructural path-dependence of building the railway station at the foot of the plateau fundamentally altered the balance of political and cultural power in Eastern Ethiopia, as in the Empire as a whole. The Harar-Dire Dawa bilateral relationship thus illustrates how patterns of infrastructural construction and consequent urbanisation aimed to pacify profound historical cleavages but ended up creating new ones. A region that had for centuries been dominated by Harari merchants and *ulema* was integrated into the Abyssinian Empire with the railway serving to encourage local divisions and competition over favours from Addis Ababa. Today, Dire Dawa, with its half a million citizens, dwarfs its ancient neighbour-cum-rival, and the construction of industrial parks and revitalization of the railway has deepened sentiments of nostalgia and decline among Hararis.

But what if the railway station had been built in Harar instead? Or what if British designs for a railway from Harar to the Berbera Port in British Somaliland had materialised in 1902 (Bekele, 1991)? Both forgone infrastructures would have increased the leverage of Harari elites vis-à-vis the emergent imperial core. Menelik's Addis-Djibouti Railway undermined an alternative political order, in which Harar's sovereignty could have been rearticulated within an Islamic East Africa, with political and commercial alliances from Zeila to Berbera and perhaps even Benadir and Mombasa. The prospect of these unbuilt infrastructures hung over the socio-cultural character of an empire that defined itself by its Orthodox-Christian and Semitic identities.

The alternative visions of territory, belonging and accumulation forgone by the railway have throughout the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century continued to resurface, if often in inchoate form. This is evident in serial uprisings in Eastern Ethiopia against the imperial state. All too frequently these have been categorized as merely iterations of Somali irredentism. This, however, is an impoverished reading of a more complex set of aspirations and shared resentment of Abyssinian overrule without agreement on an alternative regional political order. Prominent among these was the Kulub movement in the 1940s, built on nostalgia for Harar as an autonomous emirate at the centre of a loose confederation of Islamic polities. Kulub sought to make common cause with the Somali Youth Club and its nationalist activities across East Africa (Carmichael, 2001). A similar rejection of the empire and its assimilative logics through infrastructure and patronage could be found in the 'Bale Insurgency' which united mostly Somali and Oromo resistance (Østebø, 2020) as well as in the numerous rebel movements involved in the internationalized conflict in the Ogaden. The Western Somali Liberation Front, the Somali Abo Liberation Front and the Ogaden National Liberation Front are habitually lumped together as endorsing a secessionist agenda, but tactical disagreements over support given by Mogadishu and other Ethiopian and Eritrean liberation movements, and strategic differences—including whether the end goal is integration in a Pan-Somali state, a

Harar-centred Islamic East Africa or an independent Ogadenia—have bedeviled efforts towards a more effective, common front (Abdullahi, 2007; Tareke, 2000).

That none of these popular and armed struggles have succeeded in redrawing the map of the Horn is not solely a reflection of effective repression but also of the ambiguous legacies of Ethiopian state-building and the pivotal role of infrastructure. Over the decades, key sections of the Oromo, Somali and Harari elites have been coopted into the core. The railway's arrival in Eastern Ethiopia has enabled military garrisoning, industrial development, and public services delivery, resulting in significant opportunities for social mobility and patronage across diverse constituencies. Hararis, while remaining ambivalent in their discourses about Ethiopia, have long occupied key positions in Ethiopian Airlines, the Supreme Court, and businesses and since 1991 even control their own regional state (Gibb, 1997). As the Ethiopian government boosted infrastructural spending in the last two decades, it is tempting to see the upgraded railway to Djibouti, the soaring importance of Oromo and Somali elites in national politics, and renewed narratives around Dire Dawa as an industrial centre as the vindication of Menelik's wager more than a century ago. But those same infrastructures simultaneously evoke the memories of roads not taken, reminding aspiring state-builders, in Addis and in present-day Eastern Ethiopia, of the unsettled nature of political order in the Horn.

4. The Region's port: Djibouti and the logistics of independence

If the railway connecting Addis to the Red Sea was pivotal in moulding Ethiopia's sovereignty and undermining rival vistas of belonging and territorialization, it would also prove seminal at its departure point: the very *raison d'être* of Djibouti as a state is its infrastructures. Its infrastructural importance has served as a shield against bigger neighbours seeking to incorporate it into their territory. But this has also meant that its independence has remained tenuous, especially when declining demand for its logistical services weakened its fiscal capacity and foreign policy options.

The 1867 opening of the Suez Canal led France to develop the port of Obock as a resupplying point for ships en route to Madagascar, La Réunion and Paris' Southeast Asian possessions. Neither Obock, nor the city of Djibouti, to which the main port was quickly relocated (1882), had intrinsic value (Easterly, 2021). Their logistical significance was embedded in France's regional competition with Britain (and its control over Aden, British Somaliland, and Sudan) and Italy (with its Eritrean and Somali colonies), in which the Ethiopian Empire was both a potential prize as well as possible ally. Historically, the Somali Issa and Afar pastoralists who roamed the colony had not found themselves under common overrule, nor had there ever been a clearly defined territory in which they lived together (Abdallah, 2008). But France's geopolitical imperatives instilled in them, and in the thousands of Yemenis and other Indian Ocean craftsmen brought to Djibouti to physically build colonial infrastructures, a distinct identity that sought to justify its separate status in the region.

The railway to Ethiopia was crucial in generating revenues to pay for the colonial outpost. The railway-port nexus underpinned decades of close relations with Haile Selassie, who deemed Paris the most reliable supporter of imperial sovereignty when Ethiopia applied for membership in the League of Nations (Marcus, 2002) and when it sought to block British and Italian plans for redrawing the regional map in the 1930s and 1940s (Eshete, 1991). Because of Djibouti's vital role in providing imports and exports to Ethiopia, clamours for independence after 1945 by parts of the population gained traction as income from logistical operations appeared capable of sustaining an autonomous state. But that same commercial importance also led the Ethiopian Empire and post-1960 independent Somalia to manoeuvre to annex Djibouti (Laitin & Samatar, 1987). For Mogadishu, the 'return' of Djibouti to the Somali nation would mark the next step in the reunification of all Somali speakers and an opportunity to deprive Ethiopia of a port. Addis would

in that scenario become dependent on Somali goodwill for much of its foreign trade, redrawing the regional order. Haile Selassie wanted to ensure Ethiopia's access to seaports would remain diversified, especially after Eritrean rebels began a liberation war in 1961, threatening access to the ports of Assab and Massawa, which had undergirded Ethiopia's pursuit of a fragile federation with Eritrea in 1952. As France organized an independence referendum for Djiboutians in 1966-67, a battalion of Haile Selassie's Imperial Bodyguard stood ready in Dire Dawa, awaiting a greenlight from the emperor to seize the port (and railway station) in case the French packed their bags. Dixit Ethiopian Prime Minister Akilu Habte Wold:

[...] We must also consider the fact that Djibouti was part of the Ethiopian Empire. More than ever, since the railway linked Djibouti to Addis Ababa, Djibouti has been our natural outlet [...] If local authorities respect the rights of the majority Afar, the interests of Ethiopia will be saved. If France leaves, we would not like to be disadvantaged, we would not like that the [Somali] Issas have everything and the Afars nothing. (Dvořáček & Záhorký, 2018, p. 37–38)

However, France stayed until the 1977 plebiscite led to decolonization. Djibouti immediately faced numerous challenges to its independence—the question of the political balance between Afar and Somalis, the still looming threat of annexation by regional heavyweights, and the decline of its logistics facilities. Founding president Hassan Gouled Aptidon kept his country close to its former colonizer to fend off possible foreign aggression while ensconcing Issa Somalis (and especially his own Memassan subclan) in power, thereby keeping Siyad Barre's Somalia at arm's length yet ensuring Somali dominance in Djibouti (Kadamy, 1996). However, the impact of the Ethio-Somali war over the Ogaden was devastating to Djibouti's international trade, as the railway was damaged. Total volumes of Ethiopian goods passing through the port fell by 80 % between 1976 and 1978. While Djibouti had handled half of Ethiopia's foreign trade prior to the war, by the time the railway was back up and running, Addis had come to rely predominantly on its own Assab port.

Two factors came to the port-state's rescue. First, the very regional forces that threatened its independence would create new opportunities (Styan, 2016). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Ethiopia sank ever deeper into civil war, with myriad insurgent fronts urging an end to centralization and asserting a right to self-determination for all nations and nationalities. Eritrea's independence in 1993, further underlined the importance of Djibouti as a regional outlet to the sea. This became more pressing when after a brief interlude Ethiopia and Eritrea, both now headed by liberation movements that had been allied in preceding decades, returned to war in 1998, closing Massawa and Assab to Ethiopian importers and exporters. Simultaneously, Somalia too was torn apart by conflict in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s. Possible rival ports to Djibouti such as Berbera, Bossaso, or even Mogadishu saw foreign trade shrivel and when they reopened were physically isolated from bigger regional markets.

Second, entirely reliant on its location, diplomatic agility and infrastructure, Djibouti played its diplomatic cards well (Le Gouriellec, 2020). It expanded its terminals to develop facilities qualitatively unrivalled in the region. It became the seat of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development and facilitated regional famine relief efforts. Under Gouled's successor, President Ismail Omar Guelleh, Djibouti's foreign policy and infrastructural choices grew increasingly assertive, courting Gulf Arab and Chinese investment, while retaining privileged ties with Paris and serving as a nerve centre for U.S. interventions during the Global War on Terror and post-2006 operations against piracy off the Somali coast. The hospitality shown to American, Chinese, French, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish forces demonstrated the port-state's confidence in negotiating 'the presence and overlapping sovereignties of foreign powers on its territory' without feeling that this undermined its own sovereign authority (Cobbett & Mason, 2021, p. 1773).

This self-esteem also translated into audacious policies vis-à-vis the neighbours that historically threatened Djiboutian independence. While pre-1991 Mogadishu governments had pursued political union with the territory, Guelleh highlighted the value of an independent Djibouti by claiming regional leadership in dealing with Somalia's fragmentation. He organized the landmark Arta conference in 2000 which at the time was the boldest effort to reconstitute a Somali state; his efforts to bring Somaliland (a possible infrastructural rival with its Berbera port) to the table and willingness to risk Ethiopian ire by empowering nationalist factions (and ignoring the concerns of Addis' Somali allies) underscored Djiboutian manoeuvrability (Mohamud, 2021). This confidence was rooted in Djibouti's indispensability as Ethiopia's outlet to the sea. Disagreements over Somalia notwithstanding, mutual dependence only deepened in the 2000s and 2010s as Ethiopia's accelerating growth meant that 90 % of its international trade was handled through Djibouti. This gave the port-state real leverage over its neighbour with a population more than hundred times that of Djibouti but also vis-à-vis other influential actors.

In 2012, a confrontation began with the United Arab Emirates over Dubai Ports World's handling of Djibouti's Doraleh deep-water port which the company was operating under a 30-year concession. Cognizant of the Horn's total dependence on Djibouti for external trade and its importance to global powers, Guelleh defied the powerful Gulf state and unilaterally expelled DP World in 2018, counting on the backing of Ethiopia (Djibouti's main commercial partner) and China (its premier creditor). For the Emiratis, this was a rare geopolitical defeat, at the hands of a tiny African state, which they have sought revenge for, including by racing to acquire controlling stakes in regional ports such as Aden, Berbera, and Port Sudan that in recent times fell far behind Djibouti but retain ambitions to (re-)emerge as maritime hubs.

Djibouti's leadership remains acutely aware that spats with potent regional actors and sudden geopolitical changes, which have done so much to favour its fortunes since the 1980s, might imperil its sovereignty-through-infrastructure policy. It continues to warily monitor its Afar population, considering the protracted history of Issa-Afar confrontation (Gidey, 2017), but also because the Djiboutian government today would be the biggest loser of the regional empowerment of Afar communities. The latter are currently spread out across Eastern Eritrea, Northeast Ethiopia and Djibouti and marginalized in all three polities (Yasin, 2013, pp. 39–65), yet Afar desires for statehood could once again be encouraged by external players and facilitated by the long-standing relationship between infrastructure and sovereignty that this article is centrally concerned with. An Afar state, perhaps backed by a Middle Eastern power (should it ever come to materialize), might contain both Assab and Djibouti or it could just be centred on the Eritrean port (where some Afar claim 2000 years of residence), redrawing regional politics through the infrastructures under its control or ones to be potentially developed by foreign allies.

Intensifying security interdependence between the Gulf and the Horn, accelerated by the Yemen Civil War (2014-present), and renewed interest in the commercial potential of the Red Sea thus have ambiguous implications for Djibouti (Verhoeven, 2018). On the one hand, resultant new infrastructures could threaten its international leverage and maybe even its sovereignty. Seeking to emulate the remarkable success of Djiboutian foreign policy thus far, Somaliland, Sudan and Somalia's autonomous region of Puntland have offered their port facilities to overseas suitors, arguing that the Horn needs gateways to the hinterland and outlets to global markets other than Djibouti. This economic rationale is complemented by the prospect that hosting regional ports would give these (would-be) sovereign states greater clout. Emirati and Turkish investors have been keen to test such propositions (Donelli & Cannon, 2021). Ethiopia's most recent gambit in Somaliland in the form of an offer to recognize the latter as a sovereign state in exchange for granting Addis direct access to the Gulf of Aden has resulted in raised fists in Somalia and Djibouti (Weldemariam, 2024).

But on the other hand, the geopolitical gyrations of the last decade in

Gulf-Horn relations have once again affirmed the value of the stability offered by Djibouti and its port terminals, both to regional actors and global powers. The upgraded railway to Djibouti from Addis, Eritrea's controversial interventions in the region, divisions over federalism in Somalia, and the outbreak of war between the Sudan Armed Forces and the Rapid Support Forces in 2023 have enhanced Djiboutian infrastructure as an invaluable asset. For now, the reliability of its ports and railways and the enormous investments required by its coastal competitors to catch up, guarantee Djibouti's infrastructural dominance, and therefore its sovereignty.

5. South Sudan's oil: Pipedream of regional integration

The Greater Nile Oil Pipeline (GNOP) exemplifies the ways in which infrastructures constitute the sinews of some types of sovereignty while simultaneously curtailing the feasibility of other political imaginaries. Stretching 1600 km from the oil fields north of Bentiu to the Khartoum refinery and then onward to Port Sudan, the GNOP has been essential in materially enabling the once distant dream of independent statehood for South Sudan but also ties the country to the polity it seceded from in 2011. This has precluded closer integration of South Sudan with societies and markets east and south, as rival visions of an East African regional bloc through pipelines, dam and roads have failed to take off.

Like that of Ethiopia, Sudanese history has been marked by sequential thrusts to violently integrate peoples and resources into shifting imperial cores and resultant ethnic, racial, and religious hierarchies structuring relationships over the *longue durée* with remote, recalcitrant peripheries (Johnson, 2003). State-building through establishing control over gold, water and slave labour has for centuries also been constrained by geography: the sheer distances and rugged terrain—escarpments, drylands, swamps—enabled targeted populations to hide from their pursuers and bedevilled the creation of well-guarded frontiers as well as the penetration by imperial officials into unruly territories (James, 2007). The Sudd, Africa's largest wetland, embodies this predicament: continuously altering size and navigation channels have since Egyptian antiquity impeded durable control by various empires over much of what is today South Sudan (Schouten & Bachmann, 2021). This problem of projecting authority because of geographical obstacles and bitter imperial legacies took centre stage in post-1956 politics as the independent Republic of Sudan sought to assert statehood across the entirety of its territory but struggled to do so. The root causes of civil war in the south were local rejections of state-building from distant Khartoum and its connotations with Arabization, Islamization, and political-economic marginalization (Jok, 2016).

The 1970s offered a rare chance to overhaul violent core-periphery relations and establish legitimate authority through infrastructure. After President Ja'afar Nimeiri signed his 1972 peace agreement with Southern rebels, Chevron discovered oil in 1979. Most of it was situated less than 30 miles from the Sudd and, crucially, below the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium's historical north-south border. The find fired up everyone's imagination: oil and the infrastructure to be built around it undergirded different imaginings of the future. Nimeiri, and the military-Islamist Al-Ingaz regime that would govern Sudan from 1989 onward, made their choice. Redrawn administrative boundaries placed the wells in the new 'Unity' Province, a meeting place between North and South. With oil as the glue to build a new Sudanese state, the pipeline that transported the black gold to international markets headed north to a refinery and Port Sudan (Sidahmed, 2013, pp. 103–120). Constructed amidst ethnic cleansing in the 1990s (Rone, 2003), the GNOP thereby placed the petrodollars and the bulk of the physical infrastructure and knowledge developed to support oil exports under the control of Khartoum. This strategy consolidated the traditional model of Sudanese state-building as reliant on the extraction of resources from the periphery to buttress the core.

However, another pathway also beckoned. Support for secession in the marginalized South had grown, especially because of scorched earth

counterinsurgencies waged by successive Khartoum governments. The prospect of petrodollars paying for a possible independence transformed the Second Civil War (1983–2005): self-determination became the battle-cry for most recruits and commanders of the Sudan People's Liberation Army/Movement (SPLA/M). The existence of a pipeline connecting Southern oil to the Northern capital provided the secessionist camp with a crowbar to wrest concessions from military-Islamist Khartoum (Patey, 2010). Indeed, because the GNOP established an umbilical cord between North and South, Southern independence needed not be so threatening for Sudan's elites as a sovereign South Sudan would still require Northern cooperation to transport its crude to global markets and could offer lucrative transit payments (Le Billon & Savage, 2016). Despite the 2012 Heglig war, occasional pipeline shut-downs and border closures, infrastructure thus established an ambivalent but nonetheless real interdependence between two governments that needed each other's support for their contested articulations of sovereignty and the crafting of (re)new(ed) authoritarian orders (Woldemariam & Young, 2018).

The path-dependencies of these infrastructural choices foreclosed more inclusive potential trajectories. In 2005, SPLA/M helmsman, John Garang, and his economic right-hand Lual Deng proposed to rethink the links between sovereignty and infrastructure: rather than pipelines linking two states with hard, securitized borders that emphasized difference and separateness, Garang and Deng articulated a vision that understood the socio-ecological and cultural interdependence of millions of people living in the inherently porous border-zone as an *asset-al-mantiqa al-tamazuj* (Hawi, 2014). Doing so recast oil infrastructure as only one of several mutual interests and blending of influences in a space of shared sovereignty. For Garang and Deng, this diverse region of herdsman and cultivators was the real heart of the Sudan(s), which suffered from decades of war yet possessed the social registries to give meaning to the dream of a 'New Sudan,' built from the peripheries up. The petrodollars generated by the border-zone could be reinvested there to develop rural poles of growth that could balance Khartoum's outsized dominance. The road toward *amazuj* was not taken, but in view of the post-2011 economic meltdown and on-and-off conflicts in both Sudan and South Sudan as well as the unsettled status of their borderlands it is an idea that those still hoping for an embrace of mutual blending keep alive.

The GNOP and the elite politics to which it remains married also torpedoed another possible articulation of the interplay between infrastructure and sovereignty. In the 1970s, planners noted that a pipeline to Kenya's Indian Ocean coast could meet rising demand for oil from Asia and durably deepen relations with Sudan's eastern and southern neighbours. The notion of the pipeline as an instrument of regional cooperation -and the belief that a more benign regional context could help resolve intractable internal problems-was resuscitated in the 2005–2011 interim-period. It was a time when unity or secession, regional peace or internationalized war, were all options on the table with infrastructure at the centre of manoeuvres. Meles Zenawi's Ethiopia proposed deep integration around water, energy and possibly food through dam-building on the Blue Nile to end decades of mutual destabilization (Verhoeven, 2011).

Meles's propositions recast infrastructure in the Horn: if rival regional powers had historically jealously guarded their sovereignty through ports and pipelines, infrastructures could in the 21st century be envisaged as creating interdependencies that could strengthen states, mitigate regional insecurity and reduce poverty. For instance, despite a history of mutual hostility and support for insurgencies on each other's territory, Sudanese (and South Sudanese) oil could reduce Ethiopia's chronic fuel import dependency while Ethiopian dams would offer Sudan (and South Sudan) ample cheap electricity and expand its agricultural production through irrigation. Importantly, the intention was not simply a series of bilateral arrangements but a dense regional web of infrastructures to usher in a new politics. Meles therefore also joined forces with Kenyan president Mwai Kibaki to table the Lamu Port–South

Sudan–Ethiopia Transport (LAPSSET) corridor which through roads, ports, and new pipelines could stimulate industrialization and development in some of the region's marginalized hinterlands (Browne, 2015). This offered the SPLA/M leadership an alternative to the petro-umbilical cord with Khartoum: one that would redraw the geography of the Horn and substitute a more flexible understanding of economic sovereignty for the narrow preoccupation with bilateral oil rents.

For years, LAPSSET's promised overhaul of regional economic fabrics has both tantalized and terrified communities in the Ethiopia–Kenya–South Sudan borderlands and generated 'economies of anticipation' (Chome, 2020). But the political and technical challenges of building infrastructure across vast and insecure borderlands increasingly rendered LAPSSET a pipedream. While at the local level the prospect of the corridor and its 'colonial moorings' have reshaped the politics of belonging and redistribution (Enns & Bersaglio, 2019), the SPLA/M's decision to stick with the GNOP and its partners-cum-rivals in Khartoum has sapped the momentum for LAPSSET, maybe indefinitely, especially as many oil blocks in South Sudan have already reached their peak. Similarly, Meles' hopes that Ethiopian dams could be the centrepiece of a new regional economy and that trading water/hydropower for fuel might underpin a different approach to borders and (in)security faded amidst renewed regional polarization after 2013. Fifteen years ago, regional integration designs in the Horn had geopolitical winds in their sails. Today the appetite for reshaping the region's political geography by anchoring a different conceptualization of sovereignty through infrastructure has largely dissipated.

6. Conclusion

Throughout recent African history, infrastructural booms have coincided with the recasting of political order. After the continent was carved up and integrated into European empires through ports and railways, dams and new capitals came to embody the era of decolonization. The infrastructure bonanza of the last two decades too has underlined the enduring relevance of the African state after its weakening from the 1970s to the 1990s.

This article has offered a longitudinal view of the complex entanglements between infrastructure and sovereignty in the Horn. We emphasized how, across time and space, state-builders have regarded infrastructures as indispensable to buttress internal and external dimensions of their claims to exercising legitimate authority amidst a myriad of challenges from within and without. Simultaneously our analysis has highlighted the contingency of this relationship and its constituent parts. In a region notorious for the redrawing of borders and political orders, infrastructures have often failed to politically neuter competing visions of legitimate authority and belonging but also frequently been altogether forgone as rival articulations of sovereignty have changed infrastructural priorities. The Horn of Africa is a region of roads not taken and sovereignties deferred.

These contingencies underpin our emphasis on a longitudinal, relational, and regional mode of analysis, which underscores that the choices for or against different infrastructures are rarely just a matter of financial considerations. We deliberately chose not to focus on one road, canal or airport or compare initiatives in different jurisdictions as *discrete* projects because that would obscure the all-important interdependent character of infrastructures across these states. Our case studies intersect and underscore how rival infrastructural visions embody competing claims of sovereignty and unsettle existing territorial boundaries, allowing us to move beyond 'methodological nationalism' (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). Indeed, because they span time and space in a region where various incarnations of political authority continue to form and decay, our case studies point to how territories could have been differently organized – and might still be with the help of existing or new infrastructures.

The political economies of Djibouti's ports, the Greater Nile Oil Pipeline, and the railway from Addis to the Red Sea have materially

hard-wired specific commercial interests, political partnerships and sentiments of belonging over the past century. These have not been clear-cut victories of aspiring nation-states but rather ways in which regional infrastructures have strengthened the sovereignty of some polities by leveraging the dependencies of others. The Horn's fragile infrastructures enable some to prosper, while reducing others to assimilative subjects. However, these choices have failed to decisively eliminate alternative futures which continue to linger and draw fuel from the vulnerability of extant political orders. Those who imagine a reborn Islamic East Africa, or a Horn closely tied to Gulf states in the Arabian Peninsula in the 21st century have noted that the infrastructural ambitions of tomorrow could well once more remake the region. Forgone infrastructures thus return to inspire new generations to reconfigure spatial patterns. Infrastructures (dis)connect to multiple pasts and contingent futures and enable different imaginations of regional order beyond the prism of competing nation-states – what the Horn of Africa is, what it could have been and what it can still become.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Biruk Terrefe: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Harry Verhoeven:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to Christopher Clapham, Finn Stepputat and the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and comments on earlier drafts of this article.

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